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ABSTRACT

A proposal in the White Paper on the 1981 census for Great Britain to include a question on "racial or ethnic group" has generated considerable concern. This document outlines the importance of including such a question in the census, explores major causes of the anxiety created by the issue, and recommends steps for dealing with this anxiety. Racial discrimination and special needs of minorities in the areas of housing, social services, and education are cited as factors necessitating accurate census information in terms of the ethnic composition of Great Britain's population. Ways that such information could support provisions of the 1976 Race Relations Act are discussed. The causes of anxiety provoked by the ethnicity question are identified as unwarranted fears of the census as a racist tool, a lack of understanding as to how ethnic data could contribute to the fight against racial discrimination and inequality, reluctance of West Indians to record their British born children as being of West Indian descent, and possible abuses of data or leaks in confidentiality. Recommendations are offered for remedying these concerns. (Author/GC)

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1981 CENSUS : WHY THE ETHNIC QUESTION IS VITAL

A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

1. The proposal in the White Paper on the 1981 Census of Population (Cmnd 7146) to include a question on "racial or ethnic group" has generated considerable concern in some quarters. This document outlines (a) the importance of including a revised form of this question in the Census, (b) the main causes of this anxiety, and (c) the action which can be taken to deal with it.

2. The importance of this issue cuts across many areas of social policy in this country since the Census is the single most important source of data on the demographic, geographic, social and economic aspects of life in the community as a whole. Accordingly, its exclusion from the 1981 Census of Population would seriously impair the attainment of the objectives of a wide range of legislation such as the Local Government Act, 1966 (especially Section 11), the Local Government Grants (Social Needs) Act, 1969, the Sex Discrimination Act, 1975, the Race Relations Act, 1976, the Inner Urban Areas Act, 1978 and several others. Similarly, strategic planning by local and central government departments to reflect the changing demographic, geographic, social and economic circumstances of the population over the next decade or so will be seriously impaired unless the 1981 Census contained the full range of the usual sorts of information as well as an ethnic question which would enable policy-makers and others to identify the extent to which important sectors of British society, such as ethnic minorities, are integrated into the fabric of our social and political life. The importance of this issue does not therefore reside only in a concern with race relations but cuts across several areas of social policy. This can be best illustrated with specific reference to the Race Relations Act 1976, an important piece of legislation which places Britain ahead of many other countries in the world in that it is aimed at securing equal democratic rights for all irrespective of their racial background.

3. RACE RELATIONS ACT 1976

This Act placed a general obligation on local authorities, central government departments and other bodies to work towards the elimination of racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial or ethnic groups. The 1981

Census now offers an important opportunity to obtain more accurate, reliable and therefore more authentic information about ethnic groups than has been available before so that central and local government, community relations councils (crcs) and others can more effectively carry out the intention of Parliament in passing this Act.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

4. Section 71 of this Act requires local authorities to carry out their various functions with due regard to the need to eliminate racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity.

5. In order to do so, some local authorities have set up inter-departmental arrangements for discharging their obligations under Section 71 and others have appointed race relations advisers. Much more needs to be done in this direction which could be severely handicapped if the 1981 Census does not enable local authorities to see, as proposed in the White Paper on the Census, "how the family structure, housing, education, employment and unemployment of ethnic minorities compare with the conditions in the population as a whole". Moreover, failure to include an ethnic question in the Census could have a detrimental effect on local authority decisions as to whether or not to adopt their own ethnic record-keeping and monitoring systems in their local areas. This in turn would discourage other organisations both in the public and private sectors from using ethnic records as a means of promoting equal opportunity policies.

HOUSING

6. A study of housing policy conducted by the Runnymede Trust in 1975 underlined the importance of national census data in analysing the quality of housing which has been allocated to racial and ethnic groups by the GLC and several London boroughs. Using 1971 Census data, this study found that ethnic minority households were disproportionately located in the poorer quality, older, and least desirable council estates. This pattern of disadvantage in the allocation of council housing was subsequently confirmed in surveys conducted by the GLC and Political and Economic Planning which like most social policy surveys, relied heavily on census data to fully establish their statistical authenticity.

7. The 1981 Census should continue to provide base data on the distribution of ethnic minority households by ward and enumeration districts thereby enabling local authorities to analyse changes, since 1971, in the quality of housing among ethnic minorities compared with the population in general in their areas. As in 1971, ethnic group data can be cross-tabulated by (i) patterns of housing tenure, (ii) size of property, (iii) whether lacking in basic amenities etc.

8. If the 1981 Census shows that ethnic minority families are still concentrated on the poorest quality and least desirable estates, then the local authorities concerned would be obliged to take action to eliminate this source of disadvantage. They can do so only on the basis of careful analyses of their allocation policies and practices and their effects on ethnic minorities.

9. In this way, ethnic group statistics form crucial elements in both local authority record systems and in the determination of national and local housing policies. Just as various census indices are usually combined to decide the needs element of local authority rate support grant and its direction by Government to urban areas of social and economic stress, so census indices on housing are combined in Housing Investment Programmes in order to give priority to areas of housing stress which invariably coincide with areas of ethnic minority residence. Such programmes enable housing authorities to match resources to local needs for new house-building, rehabilitation and the improvement of older properties.

SOCIAL SERVICES

10. The Working Partyof the Association of Directors of Social Services and the CRE (in their report Multi-Racial Britain: The Social Services Response) expressed concern at the lack of information about the current needs of ethnic communities within the Social Services. It recommended that social services departments undertake a systematic review of their policies, including a review of the number and needs of elderly ethnic minorities to enable welfare services to be planned realistically. The 1981 Census, in providing a complete age-group classification of the total population in each local authority area (including that of ethnic groups), will constitute a comprehensive data base for such a review.Similarly it will provide a base for in-depth surveys into deficiencies in service provision in other main programme areas. For example if the census

shows that residential homes in certain enumeration districts have few or no ethnic minority children compared with other adjacent homes, this may point to a need for further investigation and action.

EDUCATION

11. In education, the adoption by local education authorities (LEAs) of ethnic record systems in schools, colleges and the careers service and their regular review are likely to provide the basis for developing effective policies in compliance with Section 71. Nevertheless, the planning of educational policies which are sensitive to ethnic minority needs and the effective allocation of grant-aid under Section 11 of the Local Government Act, 1966, require data from the Census on the general social and economic conditions of ethnic minority pupils and their families in the relevant catchment areas.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF INDIRECT DISCRIMINATION

12. The Race Relations Act 1976 widened the definition of unlawful racial discrimination to include indirect discrimination. For example, where an employer or public authority applies a condition or requirement for employment, or for providing a service, which is likely in some way to place at a disadvantage a considerably larger proportion of persons of one racial or ethnic minority group than other groups in the general population, then this constitues unlawful indirect discrimination under the Act unless it can be justified on non-racial grounds.

13. Questions of legal interpretation are bound to arise in connection with the actual size and composition of the different racial and/or ethnic groups who can comply with a particular condition or requirement. These questions will need to be determined authoritatively during formal investigations or to the satisfaction of courts or tribunals.

14. In this connection, comprehensive data from the Census on areas of ethnic minority residence are essential for the identification of areas in which ethnic or racial groups may be potential victims of indirect discrimination. National and local sample surveys would not have the required degree of accuracy and authenticity for this purpose unless they are based on census data as a frame of reference.

15. It should be clear, from the few illustrations given above, that promotional, advisory and investigative work under the Race Relations Act, 1976 would be severely limited if accurate information pertaining to the dispositions of ethnic minority groups within the broader framework of our society is not forthcoming from the 1981 Census. If this is so, why has the proposal to include an ethnic question evoked anxiety in several quarters?

THE MAIN CAUSES OF ANXIETY

16. The OPCS undertook several experiments in order to formulate an appropriate ethnic question for inclusion in the Census; these experiments were, in the main, encouraging except for that undertaken in Haringey in April, 1979. The circumstances pertaining to the latter were so untypical of conditions in the rest of the country that we do not believe that its results constitute an adequate basis on which a decision can be made to exclude the ethnic question for the following reasons:

(i) prior to the date of the test census in Haringey, an action group distributed a campaign leaflet in the area called "Say No to Racist Census" which contained a serious mis-statement of fact concerning the Government's plans for revising the law on nationality and exhorted people in Haringey not to answer question II. This had the effect of raising unjustifiable fears among local residents. The failure of local organisations to convince people that the questions in the test census did not threaten their citizenship rights enabled effective political opposition to be mounted against the entire exercise.

(ii) dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of progress towards racial equality was also an important motive behind this opposition since it was not apparent that the data obtained from the test census could contribute to the fight against racial discrimination and inequality.

(iii) the form of the direct question used in Haringey was unacceptable to public opinion largely because parents born in the West Indies were reluctant to record their UK born children as being of West Indian ethnic origin or descent.

(iv) existing arrangements to protect the confidentiality of census data under the Official Secrets Act, 1911 and the Census Act, 1920 were not regarded as adequate to prevent its possible misuse. While it was recognised that the OPCS has never released identifiable information about individuals to other Government Departments and agencies, nevertheless there was serious concern that this could happen in the future by way of:-

(a) leaks by individual census enumerators;

(b) possible attempts by other Government Departments to use this information to strengthen internal control of immigration and widen police powers of search and arrest. It was felt that such internal controls could result in harassment of ethnic minorities lawfully settled here.

(c) possible misuse of census returns stored centrally at the OPCS if a future Government were to pursue a policy of induced or forcible repatriation.

17. If action had been taken to overcome these anxieties then the rate of response would have been higher. The CRE is therefore concerned that no hasty decision is made, on the basis of the Haringey test, to drop the ethnic question from the 1981 Census altogether.

RECOMMENDATIONS

18. We therefore recommend that:

(a) the current practice of supplying a sealed envelope only to those households which are known to the Census enumerator be extended to all households to enable those who wish to do so, to seal their returns after the enumerator has assisted those requiring help in completing census forms.

(b) the Government should improve existing safeguards on confidentiality by destroying census forms after the information they contain has been computerised (without the names and addresses of respondents); alternatively, the names and addresses of respondents could be detached and destroyed before the census forms are stored.

(c) the Government and the OPCS should take steps to assure the public that existing penalties under the Census Act, 1920 and the Official Secrets Act, 1911 will be applied rigorously against any enumerator or official who discloses personal information to any other government department, outside agency or individual. This should be stressed in the training given to census enumerators.

(d) In order to reinforce the strength of these safeguards the Government should reconsider the recommendation of the British Computer Society and the Royal Statistical Society for an independent monitoring body on the security of Census data. If ethnic minorities are represented on this monitoring body, their confidence in the Census would be increased.

(e) the Government should assure ethnic minority groups that (i) ethnic and other data in the Census would not threaten their existing or future rights to British citizenship in any way; and (ii) that it will encourage all bodies in the public and private sectors to use this data only for the promotion of equal opportunity policies.

19. Several public meetings held over the past five years indicate that, on balance, it is not the principle of collecting data on ethnic groups which is the primary cause for concern but that ethnic minorities and others are not satisfied that ethnic data from the Census can be of benefit in combatting racial discrimination and that its collection can be undertaken in complete confidence.

20. In conclusion, a direct question which is acceptable to public opinion is undoubtedly the most accurate means of providing information on ethnic and/or racial groups in the UK. In the 1971 Census an indirect question on "parents' country of birth" was used from which a person's ethnic origin could be inferred. However, the information obtained by this method did not identify (a) British born blacks who have resided for three or more generations in this country and (b) children who were born in the UK to parents who were also born here. A direct question would obviate these difficulties.

21. The CRE therefore urges the Government and the OPCS to persevere in their efforts to devise a satisfactory format for the direct question on ethnic groups in the 1981 Census. However, if it is felt that it is too late to explore such a format then the CRE would strongly urge the Government to retain the 1971 method of obtaining this information indirectly as a last resort despite its limitations.